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**Ulysses in the Bathroom**

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**Ulysses in the Bathroom**

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**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2017**

## **Abstract**

### **Ulysses in the Bathroom**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

Supervisor: Daniel Sutherland

I make paintings where imaginary characters function as possible cyphers made in reaction to my life experience. I've provided in this paper a concise introduction to the circumstances that motivated me to become an artist and how they continue to shape my work today. I have described to the degree possible several key features of my work, including the cultural and disciplinary influences in my work, my process, and what I understand to be the implications for my work.

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## **Background**

I was born in Taipei, Taiwan in 1983. I drew before I had memory nearly everyday. As I grew older the rigid expectation for my education and career choice kept my interest in drawing in check after junior high school. I told myself drawing could wait until I have a more stable profession. In high school I managed to become part of a gaming community on the Internet that was oriented toward Fantasy and Science-fiction. It was a fruitful and transformative time for me. I felt free and excited to feed my wild imagination. I also really enjoyed having a community of individuals that shared common interests. I realize in retrospect that this was an ideal creative situation that I would pursue in another form when applying to graduate school.

While attending undergraduate school I realized that I was preparing for a life in a field I was not interested in. I aspired to return to the rewarding and creative activities of my youth. At the age of twenty-eight, I started making drawings and paintings again. It was a great challenge for I virtually had no art education, and had no one to talk to about my work. I had to figure things out all by myself. Books available to me at that time from the public library were mainly collections of canonical western works. References to or images of contemporary painting were hard to find. Despite all this, it was incredibly rewarding to work. Painting and drawing seemed to be the very embodiment of an inclusive playground for my ideas I've always craved. I wanted to learn more, and began to apply to studio MFA programs.

## **World-making**

I paint imaginary characters set in worlds that one might associate with fairy tales or myths. Because of my desire to be immersed in, or some might say escape to, fanciful complex worlds, I have turned this pleasure into an experience for others in my own work.

Now looking back, I have been profoundly influenced by Hayao Miyazaki's work. As a child I wished his stories would never end. I desperately wanted to live in those worlds with the characters he created. One of the features of Miyazaki's work I feel aligned with is the concern and emphasis of humanity's relationship to nature, a theme quite common in Eastern cultures and philosophies. Sentiments such as "we are all but one", "everything has its own place", and "nothing is more important than anything else", are found all over Buddhist and Taoist literatures, traditional poetry and dramas. In my own work these ideas are manifest by the way I try to connect my characters to their environments or more generally to create worlds with indivisible parts. Another important feature of Miyazaki's work that has deeply influenced my post-apocalyptic visions are his musings about the future of humanity in the works *Future Boy Conan* (TV series, 1978-), *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (manga series, 1982-1994), *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (film, 1986).

I have found other sources of inspiration and instruction in literary fiction, history, mythology, even science, and music. J. R. R. Tolkien, Umberto Eco, Gustav Mahler, and their works have significantly impacted this world-making idea. I see in all their works

the tendency to draw material from innumerable sources and tailor it perfectly as their own, into a complex whole. Mahler's symphonies for example were such comprehensive and sensitive pieces that it was as if I could procure something different every time I listened. Inspired by this, I aim to make my work open-ended or divergent. By this I mean I want to produce work rich in meanings that encourage the viewer to make their own associations. I strived to make every image, surface, color relationship and scenario in my paintings, associatively potent.

Early in my development, my work's efficacy was trailing far behind the way that my mind was working. My pieces were failing due to being obscure and not well designed. I had to explain a great deal in order for people to understand my ideas. I was truly weary of being confined by constantly translating my ideas in advance of my work. The solution came by way of embracing a process of uncensored brainstorming and single session drawings and paintings. Whatever popped up in my head went immediately into my work. The result seemed immediately different. Painting became direct. Images, spaces, color, and actions that are specific to me, and my visions from my imaginary world are already exotic, novel and weird enough to make interesting work. This process allowed me to avoid conventional and established meanings; I would simply allow each work to generate its own logic, in its own world.

## **Form, Idea, Image**

Drawing is very important in my process. My drawings are like writings for me to record and explore my ideas. I don't make strict drawn plans for my paintings; instead my drawings are flexible options for painting. Painting and drawing are fundamentally different languages. There is a clarity and natural contrast that a drawing seems capable of achieving effortlessly while a painting can hardly do likewise. Translation is always involved between the two, and a translation will remain a translation, never perfect.

For me, image and idea are two sides of the same coin. I'm essentially an image-maker. Images are generated in response to my ideas. I think of my images as living manifestations of my ideas, or more succinctly, characters. Painting functions for me like children's play where the freedom to associate divergently is paramount; a broom needs not be functional but can be a horse and a wand concomitantly. I enjoy putting images together and I'm good at sniffing out patterns, such as possible form associations shared by each image, and then making analogies. It is exciting finding unnoticed or unexpected connections between images and associatively rich painting processes, and I hope that this excitement is felt when viewing the works.

Looking at art has functioned as a stimulus, motivating me to make my own works, but rarely does it function as a primary source for my ideas. I constantly draw ideas from my recent and distant past, lived experiences. My childhood memories remain a regular source, as does anything I read, watch, or even listen to. My imagination, however untamed, far fetched, or impossible in its manifestations to a large degree is the



result of my reaction to my perceived external world. When informing my drawing and painting I usually look at many different sources in a fairly fast pace. I don't want to be too influenced by any one source or rationale, and so greater numbers seem to help mix up my ideas and keep them from being too solidified or predictable in my mind. This way of working out image combinations is now deeply rooted in how I see the world.

## **BUTT UNIVERSE**

I guess we all probably have a moment like this—when you're walking or taking a bath, you feel kind of bored. Suddenly, you're like being struck by some inexplicable lightning, and thoughts start flowing—no, flooding—Goodness, those are truly wonderful and brilliant moments! You start running or jump out of the tub shouting “Eureka!” But before you reach the closest pen and paper, the thoughts are already gone for good (and so a waterproof notepad was invented). I think that's why a bathroom scene has regularly appeared in my work, representing, I suppose, my unfulfilled desire to record my epiphanies. I actually made a few works about Archimedes as he, while bathing, came up with a solution to test the purity of gold. Moreover this is also probably why I was interested in Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' *The Valpinçon Bather* (1808) in the first place because it is a bathroom scene.

While looking at this Ingres' painting I became interested in how he depicted muscles around the shoulder blades and how it slightly resembles the form of the buttocks. This leads me to recount and then look for the countless resemblances of this

butt form, e.g., a simplified or stylized profile of an apple (in fact people sometimes use apple to describe a body shape). Additionally when many animals stand like we do and we look at them from behind, many don't look much different from us. There is a universal quality to the form; we are all created in this bilaterally symmetrical way since we were but a cell, splitting. This progression of thoughts helped create my butt figure, which has been a very generative form for me. It has been changing and mutating into many different forms, and has become a major component of my images.

Currently, my characters are either in costumes or bearing creature-like bodies, and acting or reacting to unknown or mysterious situations. Because of the use of animal body parts, my works are often associated with different world mythologies. I feel I'm staging each one of my characters, or actually, I'm each one of them, and my hope is for the viewer to experience this sort of empathy too.

## **One-session Painting**

In my current work it is important for me to finish my paintings in one sitting. Freshness and urgency are of great importance and it has been fruitful to use my experiences and feelings up to and during the moment of making. If I'm hungry, I paint food. Desire as well as boredom is a very strong boost. I wouldn't try to satisfy or kill it too fast. This is my way of channeling my imagination. Through this very fast process of brainstorming with my drawing and using my drawings in a flexible way for my painting, I'm able to focus and get to what's really on my mind without too much noise and without censoring from myself.

In the past, I had tried to spend more time on a work as a challenge. Then the painting I was working on would seem to become another painting each time I approached it because every situation was totally different already. I would see new images in brushstrokes all the time. Newly found forms would start messing with what I thought were my primary ideas. I painted, and repainted, and this could go on and on indefinitely. These paintings would turn out as if numerous paintings were piled into one.

## **MATERIALITY**

This past year, for the first time, I began to make small paintings. The intimacy of a small painting has helped me get familiar with paint as a material. This has been an important discovery. In the past, I had focused solely on my images and ideas. I had

never thought about how paint as a material could benefit my ideas. I felt quite awkward and lacked the vocabulary for handling paint in an interesting manner. I realized I had jumped into using only acrylic paint prematurely. Oil paint blends more naturally and retains personal touch quite well, which makes carrying over emotive content much easier.

The capacity to work out a form freely through my hand, whether in two dimensions or three, is crucial to my process. The materiality and indexicality of my work is a result of the directness and immediacy of my process at this time. Recently, I made a three-dimensional figure, using painted papier-mâché as its surface. The result is presented more as an image, an icon from my imaginary world. Since ancient times, painted figures, traditional costumes, cartoon mascots, and Cosplay culture (a Japanese term, contraction for costume play), etc., all, to a certain degree, animate someone's fantasy or internal world. The way I made the interior of the figure was also a lot like making a painting. Crumbling, twisting, taping, and stuffing the paper into the form I wanted—one does similar things to paint in a painting.

## **Space in Cultural Perception**

My paintings are usually quite busy and packed compositionally without a particularity to the space surrounding the characters. A sense of whereabouts is in its most basic form built on the actions and interactions of my characters, which I hope encourages the viewers to complete it for themselves. I want the forms within each work generate a sense of space rather than placing them in a conventional, Western perspective. I borrow many of my organizational devices from Chinese landscape painting or Eastern narratives. Their qualities include lack of hierarchy, broken-up and felt space, and inconsistent perspective and scale.

Living in the dense urban environment of Taiwan has also affected the way that I depict space in my works. Alleyways seem to crawl in and out of the whole urban area in Taipei. I often looked across them. To me, they were like rabbit holes, wormholes, leading to countless worlds. But those only existed in my imagination. When I would walk across, it was just the same and ordinary as where I entered. It was like trying to catch the moon in the water—it was gone once you touched it. I realized that something being looked at from afar and the same thing within touching distance would never be identical. I wonder how they can coexist on a same plane. I wonder how two worlds or two parts of a world can meet and merge without bridging the space in between. I always seek a way to blend the background into the foreground. I feel these ideas and experiences have impacted my composition strategies and exist as juxtaposed images, overlapping, or layered flat forms. Additionally my experiences have inspired me to

embrace and enshrine my subjectivity by doing everything I can to make my work a felt physical embodiment of my inner world.

Somewhat related to the choices I make when depicting a space, Francis Bacon, whose works are relatively sparse, feels much more claustrophobic to me than a Max Beckmann who makes extremely packed paintings. For me, Bacon conveys the idea that his subject's surroundings are an absolute vacuum, where one feels only stillness, breathlessness; Beckmann's however is like a whale protruding from water, breathing the same air as we do. Realism achieved through the use of illusionistic space and linear perspective has never been a feature of the visual art of my culture. When I have tried to use these devices I have felt confined by the physical rules they impose on my characters. I much prefer the images I use to sit on top of the surface I'm working on, sharing the physical space of the viewer and projecting a strong physical presence. This is an ideal in line with much Modernist Painting.

## **Thus Asked the Shoe Salesman**

My development as an artist for the past five years can be recapitulated as finding the expression that best conveys my own voice. Early in my development I felt particularly connected with Expressionism. It still has enormous influence on my work. On the other hand, I am drawn to outlier or outsider artists, sometimes even before I knew it to be the case. Their works are normally fresher and more eccentric. In fact, most of the so-called “Expressionists” I like weren’t in the German movements, for example Edvard Munch, James Ensor, Oscar Kokoschka, Chaim Soutine, among others. Additionally I always liked book illumination, folk arts, traditional ornamentations, etc, of all cultures. Additionally Pablo Picasso’s assimilations of direct, sometimes untrained, expressive depictions have been an important lesson in my development.

Because my work often strongly suggests a conceivable narrative, I feel really lucky to know Philip Guston’s late work early in my development. Considering what I already was doing, it felt quite natural to take on his ideas. Since I started seriously making art, I have been thinking about a kind of post-human and an afterworld in order to express my political concerns. Guston’s work deeply influenced my way of stylizing an image, and can probably be exemplified quite well through his own words:

Sometimes when my painting is getting too artistic, I’ll say to myself, “What if the shoe salesman asked you to paint a shoe on his window?” Suddenly everything lightens. I feel not so responsible and paint directly what the thing is, including the necessary distortion.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Auping, p. 65. See Bibliography.

Guston's direct, crude, or even "vulgar", figuration depended upon strong idiosyncrasy, which gave his work a compelling mythical atmosphere. Another lesson I have learned from his work is the way that he integrated devices of the Abstract Expressionists with those of a narrative figure painting tradition. Guston's color and expressive marks are deeply woven into his image, only helping to increase the depth of the emotive content, making it more vivid and lively. My hope is that the scenarios I set up and the manner with which I paint work together so that my paintings are both solemn and comical.

"Think a horse, paint a horse."—A note I wrote on my studio wall when I first came to study at UT is probably inspired by Guston's words. I think it encapsulates this long journey of self-discovery I have made. Finding my artistic voice has been a process of self-identifying or reconfirming who I am. I say this while I feel once again I am onto another beginning. I won't be making the same thing forever, or so I hope. It is important to make works as the means for self-improvement and self-discovery. I hope I can always maintain that aspiration to live as a beginner, always learning more, embracing change and improvement.



## **Bibliography**

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